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SIPDIS

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED

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SUBJECT: NIGER: AMBASSADOR'S TRIP REPORT

REF: A) Niamey 1181 (NOTAL) B) Niamey 1217 (NOTAL)

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¶1. (U) Summary. Over a 16-day period, an Embassy delegation supported a successful basketball caravan and tolerance campaign that covered eight cities in seven of Niger's eight regions. The insecurity in the Agadez region (northern Niger) made it impossible to include a caravan stop there; however, speeches, skits and a display of good sportsmanship drummed in the message of tolerance in the eight localities visited (Ref A). In the course of the multi-region travel, the delegation concurrently checked on Special Self-Help Fund (SSH) and Democracy and Human Rights Fund (DHRF) projects. While Nigeriens in all regions remain concerned about the insecurity in northern Niger, life in the seven regions we visited continues to move forward with ongoing road improvements (in several regions), building construction for the National Day festivities (in Tahoua), as well as field work in anticipation of a good harvest at the end of the rainy season. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) Ambassador Allen and delegation (Regional Security Officer, FSN Public Affairs Assistant, FSN Development Assistant, the Department of Defense Military Information Support Team (MIST), Management Section staff, a Marine Security Guard, Troupe Artistique Mourni (a performance company), the Government of Niger Junior National girls and boys basketball teams and national press corps representatives) visited seven of eight regions of Niger during the period Aug 24 - Sept 9. Local officials and the thousands of citizens at each stop enthusiastically received what they called a "timely" campaign, in light of the insecurity in northern Niger, and called for more youth activities that include the regions outside of the capital (Niamey).

¶3. (U) Ambassador and delegation took advantage of the basketball caravan to meet with non-governmental organization (NGO) partners, Peace Corps volunteers (PCV) and local officials, as well as to visit SSH projects and participate in out-briefs on DHRF activities. Public and private media (print, radio, TV) interviewed the Ambassador and local officials at every stop. The broad media coverage of the caravan, SSH and DHRF activities expanded the caravan's reach, amplifying the tolerance message for tens of thousands in each region and showcasing USG support at the grassroots level.

¶4. (U) Maneuvering through several detours, as a result of flooding that washed out a couple of bridges and large stretches of pavement for a few main roads, the delegation traveled from Niamey to Diffa, Zinder, Maradi, Konni, Tahoua, Dosso and Tillaberi.

15. (SBU) In Diffa, Governor Oumarou Yacouba, reiterated a request from several months ago that his region host Peace Corps volunteers. Ambassador responded that the Governor's request is still being studied, that factors influencing the decision range from road conditions (the length of time it takes to reach the nearest PC Office in neighboring Zinder), to the proximity of a health facility to overall security in the region. Ambassador noted the improvements to the road from Zinder to Diffa compared to the conditions some months ago, with recent grading of what had been an extremely bad patch of road. The improvements reduced the travel time from Zinder to Diffa by two hours, resulting in a three-hour trip. Moreover, four American medical personnel (doctors and nurses) are now located at the local hospital in the town of Maine Soroa (in Diffa), two of them former PCVs who served in that region in the late 1960s. Government of Niger (GON) President Tandja is building three homes for the American medical personnel, with hopes to transform the local hospital into a regional facility that will serve residents in Niger, as well as neighboring Chad and Nigeria. (Note: Maine Soroa is Tandja's home region and he has asked the American doctors to invite two more medical personnel to the region. End note). Groundbreaking for additional hospital buildings (to include a new maternity ward) already has begun. The American medical personnel reported they already are seeing patients from Nigeria and Chad, as word gets out that there are American doctors at the Maine Soroa hospital. As for security, Ambassador pointed out to the Governor that during her last visit to Diffa, there had been no mention of tensions between the nomadic Mohamid Arabs and the indigenous population. Consequently, the initial order issued, only a couple months after her visit (though later rescinded), to expel the Mohamids was surprising and generated numerous questions as to whether it would be safe to assign PCVs in the region. Ambassador asked the Governor what ever became of the Commission that was to study the conflict and issue recommendations. Governor Yacouba replied that he had not yet received a report from the Commission and didn't anticipate receiving one, but insisted that the tensions have been resolved locally through community meetings.

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He added that good rains this year have been helpful, as the conflict primarily had been over water resources. The last portion of the Diffa stop included a visit to the Canton Traditional Chief, followed by a meeting with a women's group, beneficiaries of DHRF support that was used to conduct a sensitization campaign to promote women's engagement in politics and good governance. The women expressed appreciation for the Embassy's support and asked that more be done to support the efforts of women in the rural areas. A couple of women stated intentions to run for office in the next local elections.

16. (U) In Zinder, calls were made on the Secretary General (SG) Ibrahim Agoumo (in the absence of Governor Yandaka who was in Niamey), Sultan of Zinder El Hadj Mahamane Moustapha and the religious leaders of the Niger Islamic Association (AIN). The AIN leaders expressed gratitude for the DHRF support that allowed them to print booklets in the local languages to sensitize youth in the koranic schools about HIV/AIDS and other issues affecting youth. They underscored the difficulty for youth leaving the koranic schools to find employment due to their lack of practical skills and inquired whether funding could be made available to arrange vocational training in their schools, in skills such as auto mechanics, plumbing, electrical and sewing. We responded that we had provided support to the Maradi Youth Center (MYC) which had successfully implemented a vocational training program. The FSN Development Assistant provided AIN contact information for the MYC managers, suggesting that AIN may be able to obtain guidance on developing a similar program. The SG inquired why the U.S. doesn't have an American Cultural Center (ACC) in Zinder, noting that France has a French Cultural Center there. The Ambassador responded that resource constraints affect the Embassy's ability to open ACCs, but highlighted our efforts to open American Corners (AC) in more regions, similar to the American Corner already established in Zinder. She said not all regions of Niger benefited from an AC. The delegation then proceeded to the AC in Zinder, where we were met by two PCVs who managed the reorganization of the AC. It is now a much more user-friendly center with better space usage.

¶7. (U) In Maradi, there were meetings with Governor Ali Chaibou Maazou, the Provincial Chief and local media. The Governor expressed concerns about criminal activity and other negative influences from northern Nigeria. He suggested the Embassy conduct more activities, such as the caravan, to engage youth. He also inquired about the possibility of sports trainers coming to Niger to help develop the skills of Nigerien athletes, to improve the athletes' competitiveness in regional and international events. The delegation met with PCVs who expressed a need for more materials to assist with their education and health projects.

¶8. (U) In Konni, the American NGO, CARE, provided a slide presentation of its food security efforts, such as the construction and stocking of a new cereal bank. Unfortunately, the delegation's scheduled visit the next morning to the community that benefited from a new cereal bank was washed out by waist-high water; an area reportedly dry most of the year. We determined efforts to cross the usually dry river bed would be impossible, even with 4X4 vehicles. (Note: A local male from the region (about 6'4") literally waded through the water to demonstrate the waters' depth. Konni has experienced significant rains this year and the main road in that region was the worst among all the roads we traveled, adding an additional two hours to the usual four-hour trip from Niamey. End note.)

¶9. (SBU) In Tahoua, Ambassador participated in the ribbon cutting for a newly-constructed library in Abalak funded with SSH support. The Public Affairs Section donated books and DVD equipment that will serve twelve villages in the region. At this stop, Ambassador asked local leaders (including an ex-combatant leader who had signed the 1995 Peace Accords) whether the insecurity in Agadez was having any effect on the mentality of residents and security in Tahoua. Our interlocutors insisted that all was well in Tahoua, that occasionally, the Governor and others would travel to areas bordering Agadez, to reassure the population in the border towns. The leaders stated that residents in Tahoua were generally pleased with the pace of developments in Tahoua, recognized the need for more to be done, but acknowledged it would take more patience and time to accomplish some tasks. The Governor of Tahoua, Amadou Zety Maiga, echoed the view that all is well in Tahoua, noting his frequent visits to towns bordering Agadez. Tahoua is in the midst of preparations for the December 18 National Day celebrations that will be held there, with construction of a new 32-room hotel, refurbishment of the artisanal village, upgrades to the hippodrome and other infrastructure projects in motion. Governor Maiga accompanied Ambassador to two private radio stations to participate

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in interviews about the tolerance campaign. Reporters at both stations, noting on air that it was the Governor's first visit to their respective stations in his tenure, inquired why he does not include private radio among the press corps that accompanies him within the Tahoua region. The Governor responded he had no knowledge of private radio interest in his activities and welcomed the stations' future participation in gubernatorial excursions. However, he warned that any reporter who misused the trips to file malicious or untruthful reports would be excluded from subsequent trips.

¶10. (U) The travel to Dosso and Tillaberi, only a couple hours away from Niamey, were accomplished through day trips. Local officials and traditional chiefs there, as was the case in other regions, all supported the message of tolerance through remarks of their own. Across the regions, communities we visited were fully engaged in the caravan and expressed gratitude for the timely message of tolerance. There were calls at each stop for more interaction with U.S. institutions and American citizens.

¶12. (U) While the populations in the various regions across Niger offered prayers for peace and tranquility in Agadez, the Embassy delegation observed that other aspects of life in those regions appear to be proceeding as normal, with primary focus on working the fields and aspirations to reap a good harvest. Another caravan planned for November, utilizing traditional wrestling (the most popular sport in Niger) as a vehicle, will focus on the fight against corruption. That caravan will provide Embassy personnel

another opportunity to visit with partners in seven of the eight regions of Niger, evaluate the security situation in those regions and gauge the public mood about the insecurity in northern Niger.

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